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SOUTH KOREA

Nuclear Weapons Discussion

Recent public discussion of the nuclear weapons option in South Korea appears primarily designed by the government to reassure the people that it is examining all means of strengthening the country's defenses following a US troop withdrawal. We do not believe it reflects new research efforts in direct support of developing nuclear weapons.

Public discussion of the nuclear option since early 1977 has been tied closely to the US troop withdrawal issue. The first official remark of any note was made in May 1977 when Korean-US negotiations opened on the terms of the withdrawal. The government since then has been tolerant of nonofficial debate on the issue. In fact, the early official statements were probably perceived by the press and the academic community to signal the end of a taboo that had existed for several years on open treatment of the nuclear weapons issue.

Most South Koreans view the US nuclear umbrella as an important deterrent to war on the peninsula; they tend to assume that their own country should develop nuclear weapons to offset

any weakening of the US security commitment.

By allowing or even encouraging the nuclear weapons debate, the government may believe it can convince the public that it is taking all necessary precautions to strengthen national defenses. There are no doubt also some members of the South Korean government who believe that the threat of "going nuclear" can be used as a lever against the US.

From the outset, South Korean officials have hoped that the current withdrawal plan will be scrapped or significantly delayed, and they may be reasoning that now—when the pace of withdrawal has been slowed—the time is right to remind the US of the possible unpleasant consequences of reduced support.

There is no evidence that the current public discussion of the nuclear option reflects a deepening government commitment to acquire nuclear weapons; nor are there signs of new research and development activity in direct support of such a goal. Were Seoul to reactivate a clandestine research program, it would be unlikely to try to advertise that fact.